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SUBJECT: BEYWATCH: NEWS FROM TUNISIA

1. The following is one of a series of reporting cables drafted predominantly by Post's entry level officers. We believe the different perspectives offered in each of the following paragraphs will (taken together) accurately reflect what we consider to be the country's paradoxical nature -- Tunisia is highly developed in some respects, but much less so in others. For more information about Tunisia or the Embassy Tunis Entry Level Officer Development initiative, see our SiproNet website (Ref).

Topic	Paragraph
Nation Of Sports Fans.....	2
Golfers' Paradise.....	5
Smelly Soap, Healthy Eggs.....	10
Paradoxical Medical Care.....	12
Anti-Americanism Diminishing....	15

#### A Nation Of Sports Fans

2. The idea of "working out" is strange to most Tunisians. Gyms are rare and tend to be under-equipped compared to gyms in the U.S. However, along with the rest of the developing world, sports and sporting figures are extremely popular in Tunisia. Soccer, the most popular sport, is everywhere. Large numbers of young Tunisian males play on weekends and during the weekday after school, often on dusty fields with rocks serving as the goalposts. Tarek Dhiab, the celebrated Tunisian World Cup star, is parlaying his fame into starting a sports television channel and has not ruled out a future in politics. (NB: We plan to report more on the political aspects of sports in Tunisia septel.)

3. One of the reasons for this popularity seems to be the apparent freedom of speech that exists for Tunisian journalists who cover sports. Some Tunisians say this is the only freedom of expression in Tunisia. A Tunisian contact commented, "In Tunisian newspapers, the only truth to be found is in the sports section and the obituaries, the rest is garbage." Sports can be one of the only real outlets for Tunisians to express themselves. Tunisians can yell at the coach and hold rallies for their sports teams; on game days roads are often blocked off near the stadiums and cars with screaming fans in team colors cruise around town.

4. Tunisia recently has played host to several world-class athletic championships. In 2004 Tunisia hosted and won the Africa Cup, a soccer tournament, which brought the continent's rising stars to Tunis. In February 2005 Tunisia hosted the World Championship for the country's second most popular sport, Team handball. Tunisia placed fourth after narrowly losing to France in the consolation match. This July, Tunisia will host the FIBA (International Basketball Federation) Women's Under-19 (U19) World Championship in the beach resorts of Nabeul and Hammamet. This is Tunisia's first U19 World Championship berth in a sport that has become increasingly popular in Tunisia. The Public Affairs section recently took advantage of this by sponsoring a visit by cultural envoys and former Georgetown basketball players Omari Faulkner and Courtland Freeman. The players, in coordination with the Tunisian Basketball Federation, conducted intensive basketball clinics in cities throughout Tunisia that were extremely popular.

#### A (Sometimes Crowded) Golfers' Paradise

5. Blessed with early spring weather, Tunisia is a key destination for European golfers who like to get a jump on the summer golfing season. Although one can golf year-round in Tunisia, March and April typically see a deluge of European golfers arriving to enjoy weather in the 70s to 80s (F), relatively inexpensive green fees, and all-inclusive hotel accommodations on the Mediterranean coast. A typical traveler, for example, can expect to pay a mere 650 USD for a week in at a 4 star hotel with 4 rounds of golf included.

6. Unfortunately, the swarms of bargain golfers to Tunisia are pushing the regular locals off their home turf. Resident golfers, whether Tunisian or foreign, who play most weekend mornings are being forced to relocate to less crowded courses, despite their pre-existing annual memberships on their preferred courses. "This is totally outrageous and against typical course management which normally favors

annual club members with preferred tee times," ranted one local golfer.

17. Not surprisingly, profit maximization is what motivates golf course managers to favor the foreign invaders. They are happy to pack the courses during the high season, despite the ill effects on the resident community. Some claim that the local regulars' purchasing power pales in comparison to the droves of package travelers who pack a typical course with 550 players on a weekend day, spending 70-100 USD a head. By contrast, an annual membership offering unlimited golf (carts and caddies extra) runs a mere 350 to 500 USD in Tunisia, although some courses are beginning to push rates up. Tunis' La Soukra Golf Club, for example, the only course in the capital's metropolitan area, now fetches more than 1,000 USD for an annual membership -- still a bargain by international standards.

18. Pressure creates resistance and all of this has created a bit of a storm against the management at one of the more popular golf courses in Hammamet (a hotel-laden town on the Mediterranean geared for tourists less than an hour's drive from Tunis), with a number of regular golfers opting for better customer service elsewhere. Thankfully, there are other courses to play on. With daylight lasting until 9 p.m. during the summer months and practically empty courses after the spring droves have flown north for the summer, one can only hope that all will be soon forgotten and Tunisia's relaxed pace of play will resume.

19. Not surprisingly, the clout of the Tunisian First Family permeates even Tunisia's golfing culture: A son-in-law to President Ben Ali recently became President of the Tunisian Golfing Federation. However, this is hardly virgin territory, since the son of the country's first President brought golf to Tunisia by building the first courses.

#### Artificial Rosewater And Heart-Friendly Eggs

10. The modernization of Tunisian consumer taste continues apace. Omo, a brand of laundry soap, is currently advertising new rose and jasmine-scented versions. This in a country famous for its artisanal distilled essence industry, whose products, such as rose and jasmine water, are used to perfume laundry and in cooking. A traditional Tunisian household is not complete without an ample supply of these perfumed waters, often made from a family recipe. But is this changing? While the annual handicrafts festival is still a major draw for Tunisians, and welcomed guests this year with displays of rose water distilleries, Omo has obviously decided that Tunisian consumer tastes have reached the point where offering an artificial "modern" version of a readily available traditional product makes sense.

11. In another sign of evolving tastes, upper class Tunisians are flocking to buy the new Omega-3 eggs offered by a local agribusiness. These "heart-friendly" eggs, which are advertised as low in cholesterol and high in Omega-3 oils, are produced by feeding chickens a strict linseed feed-only diet. Omega-3 mutton is said to not be far behind.

#### High Technology But Uneven Care In Country's Best Private Clinics

12. Because of their high cost compared to public hospitals, private clinics in Tunisia are available only to the well off -- or well connected. However, some say the price is a relative bargain for the level of care they can provide, and so medical tourism is a growing source of income for the Tunisian economy. The clinics' parking lots are full of cars from Libya, and knowledgeable sources say growing numbers are flying in from the UK to seek quicker and cheaper treatment than they can get at home. Apparently, the British National Health Service also has contracted with some clinics to provide non-elective surgery in order to relieve long waits for the procedures in the UK.

13. A good example is the new private La Soukra clinic (just down the road from the golf course mentioned in Para 7), at which emboff underwent knee surgery. Its operating room appears to be a sterile environment. The clinic has a modern x-ray machine that creates 3-D images of the bones in the knee, images that later wowed the doctors back in the states with the level of technology it represented. Other high tech equipment monitored the patient, and the skilled surgeon, trained in France, performed the delicate operation without complications.

14. However, the clinic has flaws that undercut its value. Like elsewhere in Tunisia, its marble is not treated with an anti-slip coating, and patients and equipment slide too easily in unexpected directions. Nor do the x-ray technicians bring patients a lead apron when taking x-rays, nor even appreciate the need for one. The physical therapist

does not have a suitable wheelchair, forcing the patient to walk on crutches the length of two buildings soon after surgery. The technician who changed the dressings on the wound had a sneezy cold and did not wear gloves or clean her hands after wiping her nose. The ambulance technician that carried the patient to the hospital did not strap her to the gurney. The nurses would not bring ice for the swelling knee. (NB: The real problem, knowledgeable sources say, is threefold: there are virtually no trained nurses in private or public establishments; there is very little pre-hospital care, i.e., ambulances and EMTs; and, while the clinics have lots of great technology, there are not enough trained technicians to use it -- especially radiologists. The general lack of liability and accountability in this and other sectors of the economy also contribute.)

Buck Up Washington -- We Are Winning  
The Public Diplomacy War In The Middle East,  
One Head, Hat, And Hair At A Time!

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15. Anti-Americanism in Tunisia has diminished greatly in the last two years, and we believe Tunisians' affinity for our country continues to recover from its former dismal levels. This country was hardly the only one in which the recent war in Iraq and the second Intifada excited powerful emotions -- like other Arabs, Tunisians felt personally affronted over the gore they viewed on pan-Arab satellite channels. In 2003, no-show rates at Embassy events were significantly elevated. Even pro-American Tunisians would turn purple with anger when discussing these issues. However, this is no longer the case, though there is still much room for improvement. While we are not out of the woods yet, some signs indicate that we are winning some public diplomacy battles, if not the war for hearts and minds, in Tunisia.

16. Only when not lecturing emboffs on the "double standards" inherent in U.S. foreign policy would Tunisian contacts half-jokingly explain their hyperbolic devotion to the problems of other Arab countries by describing themselves as "more Palestinian than the Palestinians." Memories of the Israeli raids on the PLO when it was headquartered here 1982-94 probably boosted their anger over more recent events. However, another theory is that Tunisia's foreign policy for hundreds of years has been based on balancing two great powers against each other to preserve the country's autonomy and/or independence. First it was the Ottomans versus the Spanish, until France surpassed Spain. Then after World War 2, it was the U.S. versus the Soviets who subsequently have been replaced -- if only in many Tunisians' view -- by the EU. The country lost its independence and became a French "protectorate" approximately 120 years ago when the Ottomans (specifically, the Ottoman-backed semiautonomous local rulers, the Beys of Tunis) could no longer balance French power. According to our records, in the early 1990s many Tunisian contacts lamented the dissolution of the Soviet Union for fear the U.S. soon would act as France had less than a century before. Tunisia is an ancient country but the Tunisian Republic is not even fifty years old. Locked into a "balance of power" mindset, Tunisians fear their country remains weak and vulnerable. It is; however, we believe they are wrong to think that history will repeat itself.

17. Nevertheless, these fears are diminishing steadily as all that American civilization has to offer this country -- which admittedly continued to permeate this society even during the worst days of the last few years -- is beginning to crowd out Tunisians' fears. The Carthage Jazz Festival brought in a variety of American Jazz groups this year. Although they were not top names, all shows sold out quickly, and groups played to packed large venues. Meanwhile, sales of pirated American DVDs have grown steadily after access to French satellite TV was briefly interrupted (see reftel). Some restaurants have re-adopted American themes, and small American flag stickers are seen on the backs of a few mopeds. Human rights NGOs are beginning to reach out to the U.S. We think the elections in Iraq and recent progress on the Gaza Disengagement and the Roadmap have been hugely beneficial in contributing to the new detente.

18. Although, many (including the GOT) cite young women's increasing use of the Muslim veil (aka Hijab) as proof that the U.S. is losing the battle for Muslim heads (and minds), we beg to differ and note the following.

- Starting in 2004, Tunisians have begun wearing New York Yankees baseball caps in ever greater numbers, and now we believe this hat is the single most common piece of headgear in the capital and other major cities like Sfax, not to mention the country's more westernized tourist-infested eastern coast running from Nabeul to Mahdia. The caps let wearers identify with America -- or New York -- without appearing to support the U.S. Government. (NB: Tunisians are generally unfamiliar with baseball.)

- Starting in late 2004, poloff noticed lower middle class

Tunisian adults, as well as upper class Tunisian children, began wearing clothes (hats and tshirts) on which the U.S. flag was printed.

- Visit Tunisian universities (where as previously reported women outnumber men) or cafes open to both sexes and you will see the number of young women dying their hair blond has gone up. Henna has been used to give Tunisian women's hair a reddish tint for years, but the existence of Blond Arab Tunisian women is a new phenomenon. This is a style of the rich most of all, but lower middle class women are doing it too, albeit with somewhat darker dyes. While this is still a new trend, we submit the hypothesis that the rate of growth of the use of blond hair dye in Tunisia is higher than the rate of growth of wearing the hijab. That's hard (impossible?) to quantify, but if true, you read it here first.

19. Admittedly, baseball caps, flag emblems, and hair dye are about more than just attitudes towards the U.S. In particular, blond hair for Tunisians signifies Europe and the West as much as it does America. For that matter, the Hijab is inherently neither "anti-" nor "un-" American. Our argument is only that (mostly young) Tunisians appear to be adopting fashions that other Tunisians can interpret as being pro-American after a few years during which these fashions were conspicuously missing. Like wearing bluejeans in Eastern Europe during the Cold War, these are ways young people can show dissatisfaction with the status quo, or just make a fashion statement, or some combination of both. Regardless, we predict further positive developments.

HUDSON